

SOC-210 FINAL PROJECT

Homelessness

Through the Sociological Imagination

By Cloe Boteler



PERSONAL CONNECTION: The reason why homelessness stood out to me is because of how prominent it is in the Asheville community. I often noticed how people were asking for food or money at traffic lights or underpasses. This made me question why homelessness is so common and what larger social factors contribute to the problem.

Harrah's Cherokee Center Asheville opens as a shelter during public health emergency. (2020, April 9). ashevilenc.gov. <https://www.ashevilenc.gov/news/harrahs-chokeee-center-asheville-opens-as-a-shelter-during-public-health-emergency/>

How Sociology Changed my Perspective

Sociology changed my understanding of homelessness by introducing a sociological imagination and research methods. One method that stood out to me was institutional ethnography, which is the understanding of experiences from perspectives that are often overlooked, specifically women's. This approach helped me see how different groups can experience society differently. As the textbook states, "The sociological imagination is the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society" (Introduction to Sociology 3e, OpenStax, Ch. 1). This helped me realize that homelessness is shaped by much larger systems.

Personal Troubles v. Public Issues

Homelessness can be better understood by distinguishing between someone's personal troubles and public issues. While it may seem like an individual problem, it actually reflects larger societal patterns. In the textbook, it says, "Personal Troubles are private problems experienced by individuals, while public issues are problems that affect many people and are rooted in society." (Chapter 1.) Homelessness is a public issue because of how it is influenced by widespread factors such as living expenses, unemployment, and access to resources.

Inequality, Conformity, or Social Movements

Inequality is a major key factor when it comes to homelessness by limiting access to important resources like housing, employment, and support systems. Social groups and institutions, such as the economy or government, can influence who has access to these resources. As stated in the textbook, “Large-scale organizations influence many aspects of social life and shape people’s opportunities.” (Chapter 6) This shows that homelessness is not solely an individual’s choice but is shaped by how systems are distributed unequally.

Growth Reflection

My understanding of inequality has changed dramatically. In middle school, I had always felt pressured to conform to my friends, which led me to act in ways that did not reflect my character appropriately. Learning about concepts such as conformity and authority, especially through examples like Jim Jones, really helped me understand just how powerful social pressure can be. I also saw how inequality can affect someone's day-to-day life through the "SPENT" simulation. I got to feel firsthand how difficult it is to make decisions with limited resources. These experiences have helped me realize that people's decisions are often shaped by social forces instead of their own personal choices.

Status

Homelessness can also be understood through the concept of social status. This affects how an individual is perceived.

Status influences how people are treated in everyday interactions. When an individual experiences homelessness, they often face negative labels that impact their opportunities.

Role Strain, Role Conflict, and Role Performance

Homeless individuals often struggle to meet expected social roles due to their limited resources. For example, someone may want to maintain a job but lack transportation or stable housing, which makes it difficult for them to perform that role. A parent experiencing homelessness may face some conflict when faced with providing for their child or meeting basic needs. These situations show how homelessness creates strain and conflict in basic everyday roles.

Looking-Glass Self

The way society reacts toward homelessness can often shape how an individual views themselves. From my observations in Asheville, I often see that people experiencing homelessness are actively looking for help, but many passersby ignore them or even avoid interaction. This lack of acknowledgment can really influence how one views oneself and identity. Based on my HD1 reflection, these repeated social interactions may cause individuals to internalize negative perceptions of themselves. This shows how the looking-glass self develops through everyday experiences.

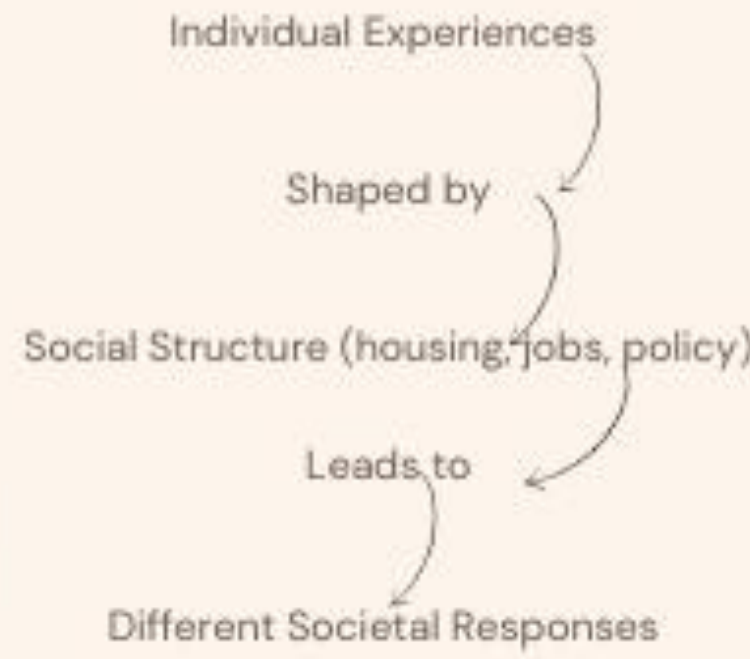
Three Approaches

Asheville Continuum of Care	Norway Housing First	Grant Pass Criminalization
<p data-bbox="719 682 1172 1151">Asheville identified that there are 739 people without housing, including 219 unsheltered individuals.</p> <p data-bbox="719 1455 1106 1673">Main Focus- Shelters, services, case management</p>	<p data-bbox="1319 682 1772 1151">Norway reported about 3,325 homeless individuals in 2020. This is one of the lowest homelessness rates in Europe.</p> <p data-bbox="1319 1455 1705 1673">Main Focus- Permanent housing first</p>	<p data-bbox="1919 682 2372 1151">Grant Pass had about 500-600 homeless individuals while enforcing the anti camping laws and fines.</p> <p data-bbox="1919 1455 2372 1673">Main Focus- Punishment and Public restrictions</p>

CONCEPT MAP

Key Quotes + Evidence:

82% believe affordable housing should be a priority.
 Grants Pass:
 bans sleeping in public
 Asheville observation:
 "Anything Helps" signs
 little public interaction
 structural Claim:
 Homelessness driven by housing shortages
 insight: Homelessness is shaped by social structure, not
 just choices



Grant Pass - Criminalization

- Laws that ban people from sleeping in public places.
- Punishments: Fines → Jail time
- Treats Homelessness as if it's a public order issue
- Focus= control behavior, not solve problems
- Connection to Sociology-
 Looking-Glass Self → stigma reinforced
 Status → homelessness = deviant identity

Asheville + Grant Pass

- Local Level response
- Do not fully recognize the root causes of homelessness
- Homelessness remains visible

Asheville - Continuum of Care

- Provides shelters, case management, and traditional housing.
- Views homelessness as a complex social issue.
- Focuses on support system + services
- Relies on local funding + programs
- Observation: Homelessness is still highly visible
- Connection to Sociology-
 Role Performance → citizens expected to help but don't
 Role Strain → services stretched thin

Norway + Grant Pass

- Emphasize housing as root cause
- Focuses on system-level solutions
- Align with the idea:
 → "lack of affordable housing drives homelessness"

What all approaches have in common

- Agree to manage under government
- Reflect society's values + beliefs
- Structure of social institutions
- Influenced by:
 Housing Market
 Employment
 Policy

Asheville + Norway

- Both provide support systems
- Recognize homelessness as a structural issue
- Aim to help individuals improve stability

Norway - Housing First

- Housing = Basic Human Rights
- Provides permanent housing FIRST
- Addresses:
 mental health → employment
- Strong welfare support system
- Focus: Long-term stability
- Connection to Sociology-
 Social Structure → systems support individuals
 Reduces low status stigma

Structural causes and Solutions

The root cause of homelessness is largely structural. Social structures shape access to opportunities and resources, which affects who is at risk. In the textbook, it explains that social structures are patterned social arrangements that influence behavior and opportunities. This idea is strongly supported by “The Obvious Answer to Homelessness,” which argues that the main cause of homelessness is the shortage of affordable housing. The article uses an analogy stating “the only reason anyone is without a chair is that there aren’t enough of them”. This shows that the Housing First approach and other approaches like it are more effective because it directly addresses the issue of housing availability.

Local Evidence

In the Asheville community, homelessness is very visible. Though there are strong local effects that make a point to support people in need. In WNC, mutual aid groups play an important role in meeting community needs especially in times of crises. Groups like these are important because most homeless shelters in WNC or the Asheville area rely on as many donations as they can. According to the [“Bridge that gap: Mutual aid in western North Carolina plays lead role in community needs,”](#) these efforts are often community-driven and respond quickly when formal systems fall short. The article explains that mutual aid is a community-driven, voluntary exchange of goods and services that helps people directly. An example of this would be how many RV parks started to give trailers/campers away after Helene due to the lack of housing.

Sociological Analysis

Mutual aid groups in NC reflect the importance of social networks. This is where people are connected through relationships that allow resources and support to be shared within communities.

The article also highlights the role of social institutions. This shows how gaps in formal systems like the government's support can lead to communities creating alternative ways to help those who are in need.

Personal Growth

Throughout SOC-210, my perspective has changed on many things. I now fully understand the importance of social structures and inequality within our world. I also now understand that these factors, along with many more, affect a person's life either negatively or positively. This has allowed me to think more deeply when it comes to real-life concepts, not just homelessness. Sociology has also made me realize that we as people have got to start working together instead of against each other if we truly want a "perfect" society where we are united.

Why this matters?

Understanding homelessness sociologically helps reduce stigma and promotes more positive or effective solutions. It allows students to allow themselves to have an open mind and think critically in real life. Sociology as a whole provides a deeper understanding of how creative, meaningful change occurs in society and within ourselves.